

Irene Hunt

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When one thinks of an Illinois author, Irene Hunt is not often remembered. Many people probably do not even recognize her name. However, when you mention one of her many books, such as Across Five Aprils, most people would recognize the title.

This author actually sparked my interest because of my grandmother, Martha Davis. Like Irene Hunt, my grandmother was an English teacher. After many years of teaching, my grandmother came across the book Across Five Aprils and began using it in her teaching. She enjoyed the story a great deal and knew that the author lived in Illinois. So, on one of my grandparents' outings to southern Illinois in October 1985, she decided that she wanted to meet Irene Hunt. She visited with her and enjoyed hearing her stories about how Across Five Aprils was based on stories she had heard from her grandfather and how much of the area around Newton, Illinois, was used in the story.

While researching Irene Hunt, one conflicting bit of information was her birthplace. My grandmother thought she was born near Newton, Illinois. However, several websites listed her birthplace in Pontiac. After searching more, I found numerous sites that listed Newton as her birthplace. She was born on May 18, 1907, to Sarah and Franklin Hunt. During her early childhood, she did live in Pontiac until the age of seven. Her father died and the family then moved to Newton to live with her mother's parents. It was here that she formed a close relationship with her grandfather, who had grown up during the Civil War and had many interesting boyhood stories. It was the stories of her grandfather that inspired her interest in the Civil War.

Later in life, she earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois and her master's degree from the University of Minnesota. She taught French and English in Oak Park, Illinois. Later she taught in Cicero, Illinois. During these thirty plus years of teaching, she realized the need for good historical fiction for children.

Her first book, Across Five Aprils, was not published until she was 57 years old. For this book she received a Newberry Honor Award. The historical facts in the book were well-researched. The stories of her grandfather were the inspiration for the story. The family farm in southern Illinois was used as the setting for the story. Many of the characters in the book were taken from people she knew. Jethro in the book was taken from James Land, her grandfather. Ellen was adapted from Jenny Warren Land, her great-grandmother. The author did an excellent job of making this historical story memorable.

Her next book was Up A Road Slowly, which won a 1966 Newberry Medal. Other well-known books are A Trail of Apple Blossoms, published in 1968, and No Promises in the Wind, published in 1970. She passed away in Champaign, Illinois on May 18, 2001.

I think Irene Hunt's work is important in helping young and old alike to understand what times were like for a typical farm family during the Civil War. She will be best remembered for her colorful descriptions and her great writing of historical fiction. [From Class Zone, "Language Arts: Novel Guides,"

www.classzone.com/novelguides/authors/hunt.cfm (Nov. 16, 2005); Educational

Paperback Association, "EPA's Top 199 authors,"

www.edupaperback.org/showauth.cfm?authid=82 (Oct. 13, 2005); The Horn Book,

“Obituary Archives,” www.hbook.com/news/obituaries/archives.asp (Nov 18, 2005); Irene Hunt. Across Five Aprils; Penguin Group (USA), “Irene Hunt,” www.penguinputnam.com/nf/Author/authorPage/0,,0_1000040677,00.html (Oct. 13, 2005); Student historian’s interview with Martha E. Davis, Oct. 9, 2005; and Martha E. Ward and Dorothy A. Marquardt. Authors of Books for Young People.]